

Chapter 4

Principals and Teachers Talk About Instruction

One goal for adopting the Danielson Framework was to establish a shared language around instructional improvement. While the rubric provides a tool for rating teaching, the conferences were intended to be the lever for translating the ratings into changes in instructional practice. Based on the rating and evidence generated during the observation, a principal and a teacher could use the conference to discuss specific ways, for example, to improve student engagement or to develop strategies for managing student behavior. As such, the pre- and post-observation conferences were a central component of the pilot evaluation system in Chicago. In this chapter, we explore the conversations principals and teachers had about instruction.

KEY FINDINGS ON CONVERSATIONS ABOUT INSTRUCTION

- Principals and teachers thought the conferences they had about instruction using Charlotte Danielson's Framework for Teaching were:
 - More reflective than those they had using the CPS checklist
 - Based on a shared language about instructional practice and improvement
 - Evidence-based, which reduced subjectivity
- Positive attitudes about conferences were dependent on principals' skills and buy-in.
- Our observations of the conferences revealed that the quality of the conversations could be improved and that principals need more support in engaging in deep coaching conversations. Conversations were:
 - Dominated by principal talk
 - Driven by low-level questions, although this varied across principals and teachers

District Expectations for Conferences

Principals were expected to hold conferences with the teacher both before and after the observation. The pre-observation component was not required under the traditional district evaluation system, though a few principals said they had always used pre-conferences. District staff also provided forms for the teacher to fill out to guide the conferences.

The district's theory was that when conferences were supported by the use of a rigorous evaluation rubric, the conversation would be more intentionally focused on instruction, elevate the professional dialogue in schools, and allow teachers and principals to be honest and reflective. At a training session, Charlotte Danielson told CPS principals that what matters most in the evaluation process is that principals and teachers are talking to each other about instruction. One principal said the tenor of the conferences should move from "how did I do?" to "how do I get better?" In the end, these conversations were intended to promote meaningful improvements in teaching practice.

The District Wanted Teachers and Principals to Talk About...

- How the lesson relates to the curriculum and the sequence of learning for the class
- Characteristics of students in the class and how their individual needs varied
- The goals for student learning
- How the teacher will engage students
- How the teacher will differentiate instruction
- How the teacher will assess learning
- If and how the teacher departed from the lesson plan
- What changes the teacher would make if he/she could re-teach the lesson

Principal and Teacher Perceptions: Using Evaluation to Focus on Instruction

Principals and teachers were generally positive about the conversations they had about instruction using Charlotte Danielson's Framework for Teaching.

Principals and teachers reported that conferences were more structured and focused on instruction than in past evaluations and that the Framework provided a common language to talk about instruction. Principals and teachers moved from using an observation checklist to one that defined instructional practice developmentally based on what principals observed in the classroom. The Danielson observation tool required principals to document what they saw in the classroom as the basis for their ratings and for their conferences. It makes sense, then, that teachers and principals reported that conferences were more structured and focused on instruction when using this evidence-based tool.

Principals reflected on conferences they had conducted in the past and suggested that using Charlotte Danielson's Framework for Teaching changed the "content and tone" of the discussion. "The conversation is entirely different. My conversation before was 'you were tardy,' 'you didn't turn in your lesson plans,' all those kinds of things. Now I think this conversation is about good instruction," one principal explained. Many teachers said the Framework gave their conversations focus and direction. The ratings rubric helped them be "on the same page" as their principals regarding the definitions of the ratings and components. One teacher said, "The domains [of the Framework] give you something to reflect on and talk about with the principal, and...we have something concrete that you value."

Both principals and teachers noted increased reflection on instructional practice. One goal of instructional coaching is that teachers will become more reflective practitioners.¹⁶ Most principals stated that the pre- and post-conferences using Charlotte Danielson's Framework for Teaching led to more reflective discussion. "Conversations were deepened because the Framework has explicit goals for improving instruction," one principal stated. Teachers also felt like the conferencing process made them more reflective on their own teaching practice. One teacher said, "I enjoyed the

Principals Liked the Conferences

- 89% agreed: the quality of conversations with teachers has improved
- 86% agreed: the Framework provides a common definition of high-quality teaching in their school

feedback from the principal, and I definitely got some ideas about some things that I was lacking....It gets me thinking about how I'm approaching the class, and how my lesson fits into the structure of the entire year, and the purpose of it."

Many of the principals specifically mentioned that the new system facilitated reflective discussions in a way that conferences using the old checklist system had not. For example, one principal said about one of his teachers, "She didn't see the value of it last year, but this year...I don't know if we ever would have had that conversation before."

One specific benefit of pre-conferences is the additional reflection and time allocated to planning a lesson. Roughly half of the principals suggested that the use of the pre-conference led to better preparation on the part of the teachers. "It made them plan. It made them think," one principal stated. "We talked together about the lesson and she revised it on the spot, making the planning process deeper and more reflective," another principal stated.

Evidence played a significant role in the conferences and decreased subjectivity during conversations about teaching practice, according to principals and teachers. A major emphasis in the implementation of the evaluation system and in principal training was to collect evidence and then to place teachers on the rubric using that evidence. The goal was to promote fairness and remove subjectivity from the rating process. Evidence might consist of statements such as: "Ms. Smith told Adam to be quiet five times." To compare, a more subjective version of that statement might read: "Ms. Smith wasn't able to keep Adam on task."

In general, administrators felt that using the Framework to evaluate teacher practice structured their

conversations with teachers, allowing them to identify specific areas for instructional improvement. One administrator explained that having evidence made "it easier to talk about the good and the bad." Evidence-based observations also helped to remove some of the emotion from the evaluation process. When talking to teachers who were unhappy with their ratings, or who had received Unsatisfactory ratings, one administrator said, "You will have enough evidence to support what you're saying." Evidence-based feedback during post-conferences gave teachers "the opportunity to look at themselves and what their performance truly looked like."

Positive attitudes about conferences were dependent on principal skills and buy-in. While most principals and teachers were positive about conferences, a small proportion of those we interviewed had mixed or negative perceptions. In particular, some principals thought that using the Framework resulted in conferences that took too much time. "I have to talk through all these components. Does the district think I have nothing else to do but observe and talk to teachers?" one principal asked. Teachers who were mixed or negative in their assessment of conferences were also often skeptical of their principal's ability to use the tool accurately or fairly. "The conference has potential. But my principal just read me the form while I sat there, and that was the end of it." This is described in more detail in the case study about Walton School in the previous chapter. Similarly, a small portion of teachers reported that the new tool and conversations using it didn't reduce subjectivity. This was described as a difficulty that was not inherent in the Framework for Teaching but was in the way it was used by principals in the conferences. "There were ratings that he [the principal] didn't even have evidence for...or it was evidence from another teacher's classroom that he must have cut and pasted in the wrong place."

Assessing the Quality of Conversations Between Principals and Teachers

In this chapter, we explore the findings of our analysis of the observations of conversations about instruction between principals and teachers. We considered these data in two ways. First, we analyzed the types of questions principals asked teachers during conferences.

We use this to gauge the depth of the conversations. Second, we analyzed the proportion of time that principals talk versus the proportion of time teachers talk to gain an understanding of the give-and-take between principal and teacher, which we use as another measure of the quality of conversations.

We do not know the exact proportion of questions that should be high, medium, or low level in order to say that a principal was successfully engaging teachers in meaningful conversations about instruction. It is reasonable to expect that some low-level questions are appropriate, especially when framing or initiating a discussion. However, asking good questions is vital for fostering reflection and learning—this is true of both student and adult learners. While questioning is an important instructional strategy for teachers, it is also an important skill for principals who are trying to engage teachers in coaching conversations.

Very few (10 percent) of the questions principals asked teachers were at a high level. We categorized 300 principal questions from pre- and post-observation conferences with 21 teachers. We sorted principal questions into three categories: high-level, medium-level, and low-level. The criteria for these categories were based on the Danielson Framework’s definition for teachers of what constitutes high-level and low-level questions.

The vast majority of principals’ questions were of low or medium depth and failed to promote discussions about instruction as shown in Table 5.

The quality of questions depended on the principal, but also on the teacher. The level of questioning varied in two ways across the principals. First, there was variation in principal capacity to ask deep questions about instruction. Roughly half of the principals asked primarily low- and mid-level questions, while roughly the other half of the principals asked mostly mid- and high-level questions. Second, some principals changed the way they conducted conferences based on the teacher. Some principals noted that their teachers had varying abilities to engage in reflective conversation, so they adjusted the depth of their critique and questioning intentionally. For instance, one principal stated, “I only give each teacher what she can handle. With Ms. Sampson, I can just be honest. ‘That was terrible. You need to differentiate.’ With Ms. Ember, I have to stick to the basics: ‘Did you cover the lesson you said you would cover?’ Check.”

Training for the new system was primarily focused on how to use the Framework and on how to give teachers fair ratings. While the coaching conversation with teachers around the observation was a topic in the training, many principals believed it was covered

TABLE 5
Principals generally asked questions that did not promote discussion about instruction

Level of Questioning	Rubric	Example From a Conference	Percent of Questions (N=300)
Low	Principal’s question requires limited teacher response rather than discussion. The questions are generally focused on simple affirmation of principal perception, such as agreement with principal rating. The teacher response is often a single word and doesn’t push principal interpretations.	I think this was a Basic because of the evidence I collected. Do you agree? Did you finish the lesson?	65%
Medium	Principal’s question requires short teacher response. The questions are generally focused on completion of tasks and requirements. The teacher provides a brief response in explanation.	How did you fulfill the goals you set for this lesson? Which goals did you not meet?	25%
High	Principal’s question requires extensive teacher response. The question and response reflect high expectations and require deep reflection about instructional practice. The principal and teacher push one another’s interpretations.	What is the relationship between student engagement and classroom management in your teaching? What are some concrete steps you can take to improve each?	10%

inadequately. Some principals were uncertain about their role in the coaching process, struggling with how to frame and lead the conversations with teachers. Other principals found it challenging to engage in constructive conversations with teachers who had rarely reflected on their teaching. One principal described her uncertainty: “I’m not sure if I’m asking the right questions to bring teachers to that reflective state that we want them to be in.” Another principal suggested that teachers did not necessarily know how to have the reflective conversation. He said, “Since I have a lot of new teachers, they’re not sure how to do it. I’m not having that reflective conversation—I’m more leading, teaching, and directing.” About half of the principals explicitly discussed their desire for training in this area.

Principals tended to dominate the conversations. One goal of coaching conversations is to have the teacher

participate actively in the conversation. To assess whether teachers took an active role in these evaluation conferences, we analyzed who was doing the talking and who was doing the questioning—the principal, the teacher, or both. We found that principals drove the discussion the majority of the time: Their questions and comments took up roughly 75 percent of the conference, while teacher input accounted for just 25 percent.

Some conversations between principals and teachers were much more proportionate. These conversations were more dynamic, allowing the teacher to explain her/his viewpoint, discuss improvement strategies, and, in some cases, to challenge the principal’s interpretation of the instructional practice. Conversations that were dominated by the principal tended to leave less room for the teacher to engage. Table 6 shows an example of a principal-dominated conversation, as well as one with more balanced/teacher-driven exchanges.

TABLE 6
Examples of principal-dominated and teacher-driven conversations

Conversation Snapshot: Principal Dominated	Conversation Snapshot: Balanced/Teacher Driven
<p>Principal: So did you finish the lesson?</p> <p>Teacher: Yes.</p> <p>Principal: And tomorrow...onto the next one?</p> <p>Teacher: Right.</p> <p>Principal: Let me tell you my perceptions on this unit. The strengths were, many of the students were on task and focused. You followed your plan. You moved from one thing, one activity, to the next. The weakness seemed to be the students didn’t know the purpose, the goal or reason, for what they were doing. Next time I will come in and look just at that...ask students what they are doing and why.</p> <p>Teacher: Okay.</p> <p>Principal: Because you see that part is important. Teachers think it is a small thing, but it isn’t. It is critical. You can have all the best stuff in the world you are teaching, but students who don’t know why won’t get it. So would you agree, that is a Basic?</p> <p>Teacher: Yes, I will work on it.</p> <p>Principal: Great, because you are starting to get there. We have to keep moving forward and striving to improve.</p> <p>Teacher: Okay.</p>	<p>Principal: To begin with, can you tell me, in your own words, what was the goal of this lesson? What did you hope the students would get out of this?</p> <p>Teacher: I guess I hoped they would leave with a better understanding of inference. What is it, how can you recognize it in the text, what role does it play in storytelling? And I wanted them to be able to identify clues from the text to explain it to their partners. The piece you saw was just one aspect of a whole cluster of lessons focused on understanding text and textual analysis.</p> <p>I had a secondary goal of working on my pacing, both across the set of lessons and in a single class period.</p> <p>Principal: And in your opinion, how did it go? What did they get or not get? Strengths and weaknesses of this lesson? Why don’t you start with the pacing goal and then talk about the inference goal?</p> <p>Teacher: I think my pacing was good on the set of lessons around these concepts. We moved through the pieces of information and the pace of the class period as well. Students were engaged. On the goal of learning inference as a part of this larger textual analysis lesson, I felt my effectiveness was mixed. I felt like maybe two-thirds of the students understood it. But one-third were lost. What did you think?</p> <p>Principal: I agree both with your assessment of the management piece and with your assessment of the inference part. That is why I gave you a Basic here and a Proficient here. Let’s talk through each one separately, and I can show you the part of the observation where I found support for those ratings.</p>

Contrasts in Instructional Coaching: The Cases of McKinley and Stoller Elementary Schools

Here we present contrasting case studies in the way principals approached conferences with teachers. Both principals were committed to the new teacher evaluation system and highly engaged. However, while Principal Andrews at Stoller was able to translate the use of the new evaluation system to have deep conversations with her teachers about instruction, Principal Ramirez at McKinley struggled to do so. The case illustrates the need for more support in the area of instructional coaching and using ratings of teaching practice to promote instructional improvement.

The principal at McKinley was highly engaged in the pilot but acknowledged her limitations in conducting conferences with teachers. Ms. Ramirez was enthusiastic about implementing the Danielson Framework. “This was exactly what I needed,” she explained. “The new system and the Framework provide the guide for improving practice and the conversations about practice.” She thought that it “took some time to learn to use evidence” but that, when she mastered the practice, “there was much power in the evaluation as a result.” The amount of time that the process took was a concern for Ms. Ramirez, but she thought the value of the approach “far outweighed the negatives.”

In her conferences, however, Ms. Ramirez relied heavily on the pre- and post-conference observation forms that the district provided to guide conference conversations. Teachers were asked to fill out the forms before meeting. In every conference, Ms. Ramirez read questions directly from the form, and she also read off the evidence from her evidence sheet and gave her ratings. As a result, the conferences consisted primarily of reading text aloud and were heavily principal-driven. Despite the scripted nature of the interactions, the principal had positive comments about the conferences, seeing them as an improvement on conversations they had using the checklist system. She recognized, however, that reading directly from her notes

was not ideal. “I imagine I will get better at this,” Ms. Ramirez stated. “For now, reading makes the most sense.”

The teachers at McKinley felt the principal was a good leader, but they thought the scripted nature of the conversations was stifling. When asked about Ms. Ramirez’s leadership, one teacher said she could “just rave for hours” and that McKinley was “blessed to have her.” Teachers were positive about the pre-conference, stating that it opened up the dialogue and allowed them the opportunity to share concerns. They saw immense potential in the new evaluation process and the use of the Danielson tool. However, McKinley teachers voiced concerns about the principal’s scripted approach to the pre- and post-conference conversations. While teachers noted that this approach was systematic and fair, they felt it did not allow for deep coaching that could penetrate instructional practice.

In contrast, at Stoller, conversations between the principal and teachers were dynamic and productive—pushing teachers to ask questions, to dissect evidence of teaching practice and, at times, even to question principal ratings.

The principal at Stoller embraced the evaluation pilot and used the trust she had garnered among staff to make the Framework a cornerstone of instructional improvement at the school. Principal Andrews described her focus as “improving instruction and putting teachers on a path of reflective development.” Teachers at Stoller trust the principal, and all teachers interviewed reported that Ms. Andrews was the strongest principal they had ever had (at this school or elsewhere). “She is strong on all fronts. Strong. Kind. Intuitive. Knows instruction and can articulate that,” one teacher explained.

Principal Andrews was highly engaged in the implementation of the teacher evaluation initiative. She took the lead in promoting the program and garnering teacher buy-in. “If you’re saying to me that you’re a lifelong learner, you’re reflective,

you want to grow in this profession...we're going to try this tool because this is designed to help us do that." The principal continued, "It has become a part of what we do here." The teachers agreed that the Framework had taken hold at this school. Teachers attributed this to the principal's commitment. It's "part of our daily conversation," and it's something that is used throughout the year. "Regardless of whether or not CPS adopts it, she's made it hers; she'll stick with it."

The teachers at Stoller engaged in deep discussions with the principal about practice that led to improved instruction. Stoller teachers noted that the conversations were marked by "healthy debate over ratings" and "a focus on instructional improvement." In all of the pre-conferences, the principal asked the teachers to identify some components on which they would like feedback. The principal conducted her post-conferences in two parts. In the first part, the teacher

and principal reviewed the principal's evidence from the classroom observation. She provided teachers with a copy of her evidence as well as specific questions, and together they reviewed evidence that supported each component. Before the second part, the principal asked her teachers to review the evidence and rate themselves using the Danielson rubric. The principal and teacher then discussed their respective ratings for each of the components until they agreed on the final rating. Most teachers appreciated the honest look at their teaching practice.

Nearly all teachers felt that their practice had improved due to use of the Framework and most identified the conferencing process as a critical aspect of that change. Teachers reported improvement in planning, classroom management, using assessment during instruction, differentiated instruction, and student-focused learning.



